

Hopeful Omens in Pakistani Prexy's India Visit
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Whatever Zardari's weakness, analysts see positive signs

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari's scheduled visit to India on Sunday, his first since he took over the reins of office in 2008, has kicked off conflicting feelings of hope and cynicism.

The visit of the Pakistani leader, who arrives in New Delhi with a 40-member delegation including family members and interior minister Rehman Malik, builds on the meeting between PM Manmohan Singh and Pakistan PM Yousuf Raza Gilani at Mohali last year during the Indian-Pakistan Cricket World Cup semi-final.

The big question is whether Zardari's word carries any weight during negotiations given his severely limited powers back home in Islamabad. After all, it is well known that the army controls Pakistan's policy decisions, including foreign relations. And, like Zardari, the Congress party in India is also bedeviled by a conservative faction for which the stalled status quo with its western neighbor is preferable to any action.

Despite this handicap, Indian foreign policy analysts believe that both Singh and Zardari have been quite effective in improving Indo-Pakistani relations during their respective tenures. Says a Ministry of External Affairs official: "If New Delhi can help by bolstering his government, this is the closest we can come to peace with Pakistan given the limited geopolitical options."

The two countries have been bitter enemies since partition separated them in 1947. They have fought four major wars and a variety of lesser skirmishes. The issue of Kashmir, which both countries claim, has been a sore point for decades.

But while speculation is rife in the Pakistani and Indian media about what prompted the president to suddenly undertake a day-long visit to India, only a small number of skeptics is unhappy about it. According to a statement by Asia Society President Vishakha Desai, "Zardari's visit shows a thawing of the freeze in relations between the two countries since the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. In the past year, some winds of change seem to be in the air."

Pakistani analyst Najam Sethi, in his talk show earlier this week, went as far as claiming that the trip signals that a "breakthrough has been achieved." According to the analyst, Zardari could make major announcements on trade concessions to India and could urge it to reciprocate by agreeing to the withdrawal of the two armies from the Siachen Glacier where they fought a debilitating high-altitude war in 1999.

While the latter possibility may be too ambitious given the semi-formal nature of the visit, there is optimism still that at least the absence of a high-pitched rhetoric (which usually accompanies any Indo-Pakistani engagement) is promising, enabling Singh and Zardari to focus upon the economic dimensions of the relationship. Also, considering there won't be any towering expectations such as those usually attached to ceremonial visits, both premiers can discuss matters in an amicable environment.

What will further facilitate this exercise is that a roadmap for a comprehensive normalization of bilateral trade relations is already in the works. It has been under consideration since the respective commerce secretaries met last year. Since then, several fruitful exchanges - including Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma's recent visit to Pakistan - have strengthened the case for improved economic ties. That Pakistan has agreed to shift to a negative-list system for trade with India and eventually grant the latter most favored nation status, augurs well.

With India seeking imports and business partnerships with Pakistan, annual direct trade between the two is projected to grow to US\$10 billion in three years from the current minuscule US\$2.7 billion. A relaxed visa regime - which could help businessmen on both sides of the Line of Control to invest in business opportunities in each other's country - is also expected to expand people-to-people exchanges.

And as a Pakistani president who has consistently pushed for better relations between the two neighbors, [Zardari's visit](#) could be a launch pad for these measures.

Thanks to recent bilateral initiatives, much progress has already been made on issues relating to economic cooperation. Many new proposals are on the table including cross border petroleum trade, the extension of an oil pipeline from the Indian Punjab to the other side, connecting the electric grids and the lifting of restrictions on banking and investments to name a few. Both leaders can also leverage the opportunity to revisit and finalize the draft agreement on Kashmir that was negotiated during 2005-07.

Though conspiracy theorists are linking the timing of the US announcement of a US\$10 million bounty on [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) chief Hafiz Saeed to Zardari's visit as an attempt to derail it, the fact of the matter is that another 26/11 type of Mumbai attack would do far more to damage bilateral ties than proactive steps to contain any such mishap later.

C. Raja Mohan of the Center for Policy Research wrote in The Indian Express that "Singh and Zardari know that in the bleak political landscapes they both confront, the only bright spots are the possibilities they have created for each other in exploring new avenues of bilateral cooperation....In trying to pick up the threads of the dialogue in 2009, both leaders will have to overcome much skepticism at home."

That shouldn't be tough, Mohan added, considering the remarkable resilience both Singh and Zardari have displayed in engineering a breakthrough in bilateral trade relations.

However, some serious questions linger. "Will the Pakistani military, especially ISI, allow for any semblance of reduction of tension when their very existence is predicated upon their sense of competition with India?" asks Desai. Besides, she adds, India is extremely concerned about the fate of Afghanistan and the role of Pakistan's military in the aftermath of American troop withdrawal from the region.

The huge trust deficit between the foreign policy establishments in both countries will also require strong action and a clear vision from the leaders of the two countries. Therefore, it remains to be seen if they have what it takes to give this accident-prone relationship a sustained momentum.

Though neither side can expect game-changing moments from Zardari's ceremonial visit, the strategy, is expected to focus on smaller issues that can generate a positive buzz and create a semblance of momentum in peace talks.

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